

The Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Academic Writing: Implications for EAP

Debra Jones and Neil Adam Tibbetts

*Centre for Academic Language and Development
University of Bristol*



Our research context

- In-sessional Coordinators PGT
- Special Interest Group (SIG) Online translation tools
- Has become AI SIG – emergence of ChatGPT



Our research approach

- Situated practice of academic writing
- Positioning - intermediaries in PGT learning
- Exploratory research
- Non-judgmental, open-minded approach
- Ethnographic account

Aim: Be better informed as a centre and teachers, and to share findings with lecturers



Questions to think about

1. Which online translation tools / software can you name and which ones do you use?
2. How do you think students use online tools / software in their studies?
3. What do you consider to be acceptable/unacceptable use of online tools / software in academic writing?
4. Are there any potential benefits of using online tools / software for academic writing?

What are your initial thoughts?



Initial project (summer 2022)



"To explore the views of EAP teachers and subject teachers on an International Foundation Programme regarding student use of online tools in their academic work"

- Focus mainly Google Translate/ Grammarly
- Survey: 23 responses (out of 51) - 17 EAP tutors/6 subject tutors
- Focus Groups: 8 tutors – 6 EAP/2 subject tutors

Previous findings

- No consensus about the acceptability of online tools
- More acceptable for reading/vocabulary than writing (*Jolley & Maimone, 2015*)
- Gap between teacher perceptions and student practice (*Clifford et al, 2035; Jolley & Maimone, 2015*)
- Focused on foreign language/translation studies context not EAP/ non-language subjects (*exception Groves & Mundt, 2021*)



Our findings: Survey








- Teachers more positive about online tools use in reading/vocabulary than writing
- No differences between EAP & Subject teachers
- Majority (20/23) think teacher should help students use these tools more effectively
- Is it cheating? - majority say depends on context

Using online tools to help vocabulary

12. What is your attitude towards students using online translation tools to help with vocabulary learning?

[More Details](#)

 Insights

 Strongly approve	4
 Approve	9
 Disapprove	2
 Strongly disapprove	0
 It depends on the context	8








To help with reading

11. What is your attitude towards students using online translation tools to help with their reading comprehension? (e.g. translating English texts into their first language).

[More Details](#)

 Insights

	Strongly approve	3
	Approve	2
	Disapprove	3
	Strongly disapprove	0
	It depends on the context	14








To help with writing

13. What is your attitude towards students using online translation tools to help produce writing?

[More Details](#)

 Insights

 Strongly approve	2
 Approve	2
 Disapprove	6
 Strongly disapprove	2
 It depends on the context	11








To develop subject knowledge

14. What is your attitude towards students using online translation tools to develop subject knowledge (e.g. to translate sources from English to their first language)?

[More Details](#)

 Insights

	Strongly approve	3
	Approve	7
	Disapprove	1
	Strongly disapprove	1
	It depends on the context	11



Our findings: Survey

- No differences between EAP & Subject teachers
- Majority (20 out of 23) think teacher should help students use these tools more effectively
- Acceptable use – Is it cheating?






Is it cheating?

15. Would you consider the use of online translation tools for writing assignments as cheating? (0 point)

[More Details](#)

 Insights

 Yes	3
 No	6
 It depends on the context	14



Focus groups



If you answered 'it depends on the context' to any of the questions in the survey, can you explain what it depends on; in what context would the use of translation tools be acceptable or unacceptable?

What does it depend on?

Depends on what they're doing and why:

- *“Perhaps looking up a word to check that they understand its meaning would be fine, but directly translating a whole paragraph of work in their native tongue to English would be considered cheating”*
- *“If words in L1 pop into their head and they do not know the English for it , they might use a tool and this could be appropriate. If they translate an entire essay from L1 to L2 , this would be inappropriate”*
- *“if students use translation tools in a way that enhances their learning then there may be a place for them. So if they are translating, but then recording what they translate and doing this in the target language, then it can be useful”*



What does it depend on?



The purpose of the task:

“to access the content, I think initially students might need to have texts translated into their own language to get the ideas. However, if the purpose is for them to develop language, I think then we need to consider or to have the discussion with students about, you know, the reason why it's important to read in the target language”

“if the learner's aim is to learn to write an essay really well in English and they're really relying on translation tools, they're not going to achieve that aim. But if their aim is to just get the get the subject knowledge out of it, then you know, they don't really care about writing in English”

What does it depend on?

The purpose of the assessment:

- *“if the purpose of the assignment is to demonstrate knowledge in the target language, writing the assignment in L1 and then translating would be cheating as it would not in effect be reflective of the student's own language”*
- *“If the thing to be assessed is their ability to write, then they should not rely on a translation tool. If the thing to be assessed is something else, why not use whatever tools available to make the best piece of work possible?”*



What does it depend on?

Motivation:

“Those who view the existence of different languages as a communication problem to be solved, rather than as an example of the richness and diversity of human culture and cognition, would argue that rapidly improving MT technologies, plus the dominance of English internationally, obviate the need for the study of other language” (Case, 2015)



What does it depend on?

Motivation

“the problem might be that students are very result oriented and so they're thinking OK, I need to use these tools in order to write this particular essay or assignment so I can get the grade that I need in order to progress.”

“if the student isn't really interested in improving their English very much because they're going to go back to their home country and they're not really going to use much while they're there, you know, maybe there isn't much for point in them learning these things. So maybe it just comes down to what the individual student wants to get out of their degree. I don't know.”



Negative perceptions

“students [use] these tools with good intentions, but then they rely on them as a crutch, and then that they default to technology for their answers.”

“when we introduce certain digital tools to kind of help out our students, we’re making their lives easier, but we’re denying them that struggle that’s necessary to develop.”

“They want the results there and then, they’re not prepared to work... they’ve got access to all these and devices or tools that they can use to get to that path very easily and the joy of the hard work and falling down and learning from your mistakes seems to have almost disappeared or been forgotten.”



In summary

- willingness to engage with these tools in the classroom
- nuanced views about when it's appropriate
- acceptable if used for learning but not as a 'quick fix'
- instrumental v intrinsic motivation



Current research project

"An ethnographic investigation into student use of online translation tools and student and lecturer perceptions of the acceptability of using these tools in the academic writing process."



Research details



- Students AND Lecturers – in-session contexts (not Foundation level)
- Semi-structured interviews with students we work with
- And lecturers we work with
- Not comparing lecturer with specific cohort- we want a snapshot of PGT practice
- Started with PGT students in Science (School of Physics)
 - have taught them in TB1 – positioning of researcher

Questions for students (in yellow will be different for lecturers)



1. Which online translation tools / software can you name?
2. Which ones do you use?
3. What is your process of using these tools? Can you explain exactly how you use them?
4. Do you think it is acceptable to use online tools/software in academic writing? What would be unacceptable use?
5. Are there any potential benefits of using online tools/software for academic writing?
6. What are the rules on your course about using online tools / software? Has this been communicated to you?

Initial findings- Practical points



- GT – limitations, e.g. not formal enough
- Convenience (efficiency/speed/quality) is important- more likely to use if built into app = Word/Grammarly
- Tendency to use tools more for reading/vocab than writing
- Can't use translated content without checking it
- Want to be able to write 'proper' academic writing
- Know the potential problems but no guidelines, only rules about plagiarism
- ChatGPT - not yet landed?

Use

(GT)" [I use it] for translation, it's generally when I'm reading papers, when I'm researching, it's generally helpful just to like because sometimes the technical language is a bit difficult to use Google Translate in that case a lot. It's less when I'm writing because generally, like the words are coming to my mind."

"For example, I just suppose I want to write a line which I have no clue how to how to write it. I am very much clear in my own language. What I want to write, but I I can't type it in English for some reason like I can't catch good words just for that line. I use Google translate."

"Sometimes for example the connection words I just run out of connection words, so it just literally type in Chat GPT. I need a new.. I need a connection word for this case or I can put my whole sentence and say I want a connection word here or something and it can help me in that and I can use it sometimes I have, I have a sentence, it's written and everything, but it's not very professional."



Use and limitations



(GT) "I think is the only one which has Hindi. So among these I use Google translator and as I mentioned that I use Grammarly more than these translation tools. So how do I use it? Well, I would say I try to write it as a rough draft using the Google translator and then I use QUILBOT to paraphrase it. So you just need to open the site and then just copy and paste your rough draft on the site and then you can just paraphrase it. So it's very easy and then you can copy from it and then paste in your document. Of course you need to reverify and review it before you actually like put it into your document, but yeah."

"It's going to take a lot of time when I need to check it from Grammarly or maybe I check the vocabulary from the thesaurus or Google Translate it's a lot of time if I just write it in my own language, probably it's just going to take like one day. But doing the translation I need like one week."

Problems with use



"I actually also prefer when I don't prefer too much using Google Translate in translating words because I want them in English because it's better to understand, because like I think of it like the whole English language system and the whole Arabic language system, ... It is different. "

"I know that some of my classmates they translate from Chinese to English use Google Translate in Chinese. But there's for me it's more like I could write English directly rather than writing Chinese first in my first draft. [...] how you write and how you thinking in Chinese and English in different languages it's different. So you if you start with another language just directly translate this now it will not work [...] when you come to England to, you know, improve your English level so if you still using the Chinese directly, you know, just directly translate you will not improve your English level English and study."

Benefits



[translation tools] “They give me new vocabulary, so I gained another vocabulary from them.”

“It's helped me a lot because I'm not, I said, not fluent in English”

“Sometimes the one problem that I always go through is that I don't know how to start, where to start. I think I just try to make this draft in my mind as simple as possible, like as simple as possible for me, and then I just write it in the Grammarly and then it translate it paraphrases to really to really a nice piece of lines. So it's definitely beneficial. Because it saves a lot of time.!”

‘Self-scaffolding’

“Now at this level I think I have good command over English so I never I can, I can never like if I go from Hindi to English. I think it's a very bad idea and I believe that I think it's only useful like Google translators and all these are only useful for the people who have really less knowledge about English. So they but people like that generally on that. But as I said I have OK command on English, I just use a bit of it. And for some phrases or some lines actually which I have no clue how to write. So I would say that to create a rough draft for some lines or some paragraphs.”

“So, I think when put all of the one paragraph to Google Translate, the translation is not good. I don't know why [...] especially for more scientific terms, yeah. But if it's like a daily... like when I reading newspaper it's good to use Google Translate for this whole page. But I'm trying not to do it again now because I try to learning.”

“I'm big fan of Grammarly, but I'm not really like the using it. [...] this is not the real sentence that I wrote, so this is not really me [...] I'm not really happy, but I'm using it [...] I wish that I can write without any software help and my English will be fluent.”



Acceptable?



“If you have a sentence and you don't think it's very appropriate, you want to rephrase it. You can ask it to rephrase it to you. I don't think there's a problem with it because you already have the thing in your mind.”

“Based on my point of view, using Google Translate it's not good because you can detect it as plagiarism for the similarity and also from ChatGPT. That's definitely taking from another people, right?”

“I wouldn't like the ChatGPT to write everything for me like I want to write my own work. I just need sometimes help with it. Yes, but I want to write what I'm writing.”

Rules?

“I have like 99 to 95% have switched to Grammarly, so initially to be honest I had no i... I was not very aware of this concept of plagiarism, how much serious it is. So I I remember where I'm just writing an example here. I remember my first first piece of writing for the UoB I just wrote something on the Grammarly section and then I just paraphrased it, and then I just copied it, but that is the worst way to do it, because even though it's a paraphrasing tool, but it will never be good enough, you will be caught of plagiarism in a click.”

“X and the other lecturers, they just don't talk about any of any of these things, none of them, they don't mention. No, they just really care about the similarity and also the grammar I think.”

“I don't know that there exists even a line that a beyond this is unacceptable. So even if I write everything in Arabic, then I translated to English, I think their only concern is that would it make sense or not?”

“I wouldn't say there is a clear communication about the lines not to go beyond [...] They only talk about plagiarism. [...] some may suggest like use Grammarly to check your grammar [...] No one talks about translation and what's accepted, what's not.”

What comes next?

- Different disciplines (different English proficiency levels?) + lecturers
- ChatGPT will have more impact in the future?
- Efficiency and efficacy – a focus for discussion?
- No-one talks about



Tentative conclusions

- Need to be more open about this issue
- Students using the tools responsibly
- Students understand their limitations of the tools they're part of a process of development (self-scaffolding)
- Writer identity is important to student writers



References

Clifford, J., Merschel, L., & Munne, J. (2013). Surveying the landscape: What is the role of machine translation in language learning? @tic. *Revista D'innovacio Educativa*, 10, pp.108-121.

Groves, M. & Mundt, K. (2021). A ghostwriter in the machine? Attitudes of academic staff towards machine translation use in internationalised higher education. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 50, pp. 1-11.

Jolley, J. R., & Maimone, L. (2015). Free online machine translation: Use and perceptions by Spanish students and instructors. *Learn languages, explore cultures, transform lives*, pp.181-200. Lincoln: University of Nebraska.



Any questions?

debra.jones@bristol.ac.uk

neil.tibbetts@bristol.ac.uk

